Revealing a Murderer's Guilt Without a Confession

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Analyzing 911 Calls

Miriam Helmick told police she planned to meet her husband for Chinese food at lunchtime. But, when Alan Helmick never showed and she couldn't reach him on his cell phone, she drove to their Colorado home to look for him. It was then she told police she discovered his lifeless body on the kitchen floor. Soon after that she made a fateful 911 call that would help prove she had a hand in her husband's untimely death.

Mesa County (Colo.) Sheriff's Sgt. Henry Stoffel, who was investigating Alan Helmick's death, read an article in the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Law Enforcement Bulletin entitled, "911 Homicide Calls and Statement Analysis: Is the Caller the Killer?" The article, written by Susan H. Adams, Ph.D., and Moraine (Ohio) Police Lt. Tracy Harpster, provided details about an investigative tool that gives investigators clues about the first report of a homicide — the 911 call.

Stoffel asked Harpster to review the Helmick case for clues about the murder.

"It's like so many of the other things we use," Stoffel said. "It's not an exact science that's been accepted in the courts, but it arms you with something else before you step in that interview with that suspect. So many times you only get one shot. When we have a homicide now, it's one of the first things we do — especially where it is a family member calling 911."

Miriam Helmick, a new-to-town dance teacher in the cozy town of Grand Junction, Colo., met her husband of less than two years when the widower joined her class, according to a Dateline NBC report on the case. Miriam also was widowed when her husband allegedly committed suicide in their Florida home two years before she moved to Colorado. She and Alan found a connection on the dance floor.

When Miriam Helmick called 911 in June 2008 to report the murder, she indicated her house had been robbed and her husband killed. But, Stoffel said the investigation revealed the crime scene had been staged. From there, the case took several bizarre twists and turns. Then Harpster and Adams analyzed the 911 call.

"A lot of the things [Harpster and Adams] talk about, she did," Stoffel said of Miriam Helmick. "Immediately she was trying to say, 'I wasn't here, I was at this place,' trying to prove herself innocent. 'He's dead, he's dead.' A lot of people don't say, 'He's dead,' they say, 'Get me help.' She said, 'We were robbed.' No one says that. They're more worried about the dead body than being robbed. It was very nice. It almost fit to a T everything [they] say."

The Colorado case is just one of more than 500 that Harpster and Adams have examined across the country. The duo have analyzed several Kentucky cases as well, including homicides in Bowling Green and Boone County that are both nearing adjudication.

Boone County Detective Matt Mullins has used 911-call analyzation in two ongoing homicide investigations, and intends to use it again in a double homicide he is investigating.

"The two cases I used [their] analysis on, it gave me really good insight," Mullins said. "I think it's an excellent, excellent tool that should be used on any suspicious death or homicide. It will allow you to better form a strategy of how you want to interview your witness or suspect and have a better grasp of what kind of questions you need to ask and understand inconsistencies."

Of all the statements officers get during a homicide investigation, Harpster and Adams said most are contaminated, either by the way the questions are asked or the environment in which the interview is taking place.

"One statement is very pristine and is the least contaminated of all — the 911 call," Harpster said. "'What is your emergency?' is an open-ended question and the caller just spills. And, it's recorded.

"So, the point of the program is for us to recognize how valuable these statements are as evidence, then to teach students how to determine the indicators of guilt and indicators of innocence so they can use them," Harpster continued. "Because 30 percent of all murderers call in their own crime pretending to be innocent."

There were roughly 18,000 murders in the United States last year, Harpster said.

"That means 5,400 murderers called in posing as an innocent," he said. "Wouldn't we, as officers, want to know if there was a way we could tell that the person is likely the offender or likely innocent? Wouldn't we want to know either way to allocate our resources and devote a strategy accordingly?"

ANALYZING THE CALL

Adams and Harpster conducted a study during which they evaluated 100 calls from closed cases. The study included 50 callers who were proven guilty of committing the homicide they reported. The other 50 were innocent. As a result of the study, Adams and Harpster recognized a pattern that can assist investigators in determining the caller's guilt. Three questions helped in this examination of calls:

- What was the call about?
- Who was the call about?
- How was the call made? >>

▼ **Telecommunicators taking information during a homicide call may be recording the only statement a killer will ever make. Investigators have a unique opportunity to use these early statements to prove the caller innocent or guilty.**

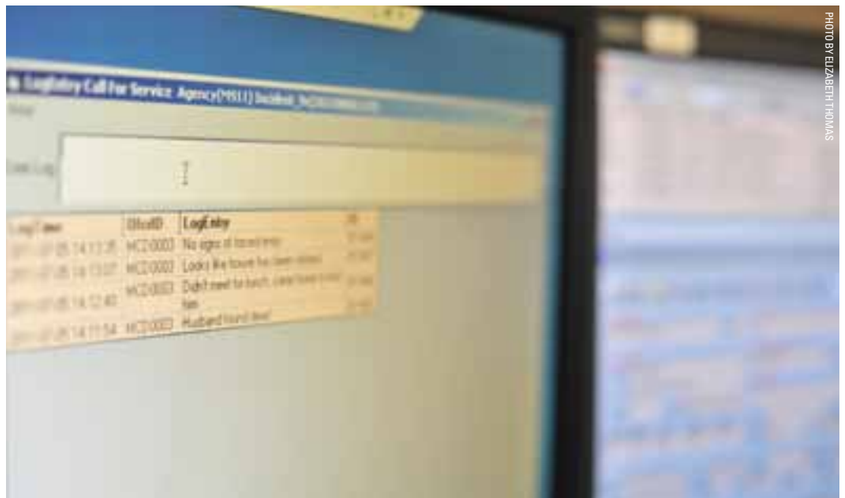

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PHOTO BY ELIZABETH THOMAS

>> "When analyzing a 911 homicide call, the investigator's primary question should be, 'Was the caller requesting assistance?'" Adams and Harpster wrote in the FBI publication. "If not, why not? Was the individual simply reporting a crime? Almost twice as many innocent callers (67 percent) in this study asked for help for the victim than did guilty callers (34 percent)."

Investigators also should look at the relevance of the information the caller provides, Harpster said. Most of the guilty callers deceived by omission instead of bold-faced lies. The information they provided in many cases was confusing, extraneous and mere rambling instead of clear details.

"People who provide more information than necessary may be attempting to convince someone of a deceptive story rather than simply conveying truthful information," the report states.

Additionally, those who provided information that was incorrect and never made any effort to correct themselves were proven guilty in every instance of the study.

Harpster and Adams also suggested investigators should be wary of callers who have a negative attitude toward the victim. Blaming the victim or casting insults should be red flags. In their study, Harpster and Adams gave an example from a father's 911 call, where the parent reported his 4-year-old-daughter needed medical assistance.

Telecommunicator: Do you know what's wrong with your daughter?

Guilty caller: Not a clue.

Telecommunicator: Has she taken any medications?

Guilty caller: Maybe. She's very, very sneaky. She threw a huge temper tantrum earlier. She might have taken something.

Five percent of callers in Adams' and Harpster's study blamed or insulted the victims and each were proven guilty, the report states.

VOICE MODULATION

Hearing the caller's voice gives investigators an advantage if they understand how to interpret the tones, speed, pitch and volume in that person's speech.

"How someone delivered a message can offer as much insight as the message itself," Harpster and Adams wrote. "… Emergency situations demand urgency, and previous studies of homicide statements have shown that the presence of emotion indicates veracity."

For instance, Harpster offered the example of a mother who awoke to find her infant child had suffocated during the night. During the 911 call, the mother — innocent of any involvement in the death — began screaming at the telecommunicator when she thought the paramedics were taking too long to reach her child.

"Thirty-seven percent of the callers in the study made urgent and demanding pleas for help, and each was innocent," Adams and Harpster wrote. "This finding was the strongest indicator of innocence in the study."

In contrast, callers who are uncooperative, who repeat themselves, interrupt themselves and change the direction of the topic were found to be guilty of the crimes in most cases.

"Thirty percent of the callers in this study used self-interruptions, and each was guilty," the report states. "This was the second-strongest correlation with guilt in the study."

"What happens is, when an innocent or guilty caller comes upon a dying or dead person or victim, there is a lot of stress on that person," Harpster said. "Whether they are innocent or guilty, there is a lot of stress. And when they call 911, that stress gives us clues and insight about whether they are likely the offender or not. Primarily — at this point — this is a tool to help detectives form an investigative strategy."

CONFIRMATION

Investigators in Minnesota and Pennsylvania, however, have used the tool to confirm that their investigations were on the right track.

In Eveleth, Minn., Eveleth Police Chief Brian Lillis attended one of Harpster's training seminars about two to three weeks after a suspicious death in his jurisdiction.

"A convicted felon made a 911 call," Lillis said. "A few months earlier he had been released from prison for involvement in a murder. He had moved in with a woman after his release from a halfway house, and within about a six-week period, she ended up dead."

The woman had fallen down a flight of stairs while heavily intoxicated. The combination of the fall, previous injuries that were aggravated in the fall and her body being handled afterward ultimately led to her death, Lillis said. But there was a lot of suspicion about whether or not the fall was accidental.

"I've been in the business for a long time and I realize the value and importance of the 911 calls to a case," Lillis said. "But, I guess I wasn't that familiar with the method you would use to constructively analyze a call like that. It is quite interesting."

Like Colorado's Stoffel, Lillis sent the case to Harpster and Adams for review.

"He graciously reviewed the data, gave me a call and we both went through it together," Lillis said. "We reached our determinations at about the same time. It certainly gave me at least some level of comfort that the investigation into his level of culpability was probably on the right track. Like any other investigation, you follow different pieces that you're looking at. This was one piece that bolstered the fact that we were looking at this in the right fashion."

Lancaster, Penn. Investigator Larry Martin's case was already in trial when he received the FBI article about call analysis. Harpster and Adams reviewed the 911 call and came to the same conclusion as Martin had after a grueling six-month investigation.

"If we would have gotten him six months earlier, it would have been great," Martin said. "I have used his checklist on two other cases where it really helped us out. We were really curious about what he had to say. We were basically curious to see if we missed anything. We knew he did it and that the 911 tape was bogus. In a few minutes, [Harpster and Adams] came up with the same thing we had after we listened to that tape for hours.

"These 911 tapes are incredible," Martin continued. "I think it is a resource we should use more in our investigations."

Harpster agrees. The 911 call sometimes is the only statement officers ever get from an offender. And after 28 years on the job, Harpster said he wishes he had known years ago what he knows now.

"When I used to be a detective sergeant, I had three Sudden Infant Death Syndrome cases in one week," Harpster said. "We had our protocol. I would go meet my partner, we would go to the childrens' hospital, talk to the ER nurse and ER doctor, examine the body, talk to the family, we may have done a search warrant — we never looked at the 911 call. I thought, 'Why should I? I'm here?' After studying them, I know what a guilty father, mother or boyfriend sounds like, and I'm sick to my stomach that I know I missed some murders.

"This is why I'm teaching it all over the place," Harpster continued. "I want cops and investigators to know the difference between a guilty or innocent caller, so they cannot miss things."

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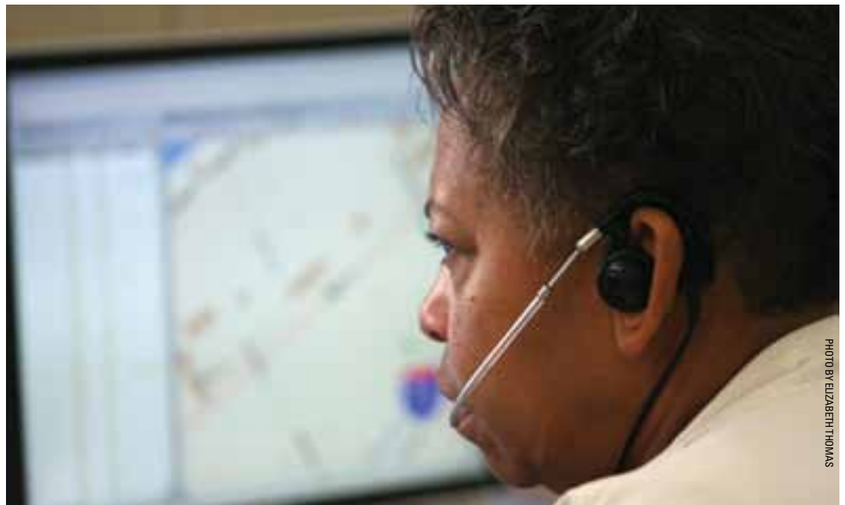
▼ **The homicide caller's vocal cues are as important as the words used to tell the story. A mother who is hysterical after finding her child not breathing is more likely to be innocent than a father who seems cold and calm about his lifeless child.**



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Do you want to know more about analyzing 911 homicide calls?

If you have questions about how you can use this tool in your own investigations, please contact Moraine (Ohio) Police Lt. Tracy Harpster. He can be reached by email at tracy.harpster@gmail.com, or by calling (937) 535-1153.